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## A Chinese Woman Writer's American South

IN *OUR SOUTH: GEOGRAPHIC FANTASY AND THE RISE OF NATIONAL Literature*, Jennifer Rae Greeson demonstrates how the concept of the South was essential to the making of national identity in the United States of America. As an internal other for the nation, an intrinsic part of the national body that is nonetheless differentiated and held apart from the whole, the South became a term of imagination, a site of national fantasy. Quoting the first line of Whitman's 1860 poem "O Magnet-South"—"O magnet-South! O glistening perfumed South! My South!" (7)—Greeson highlights this "metropolitan authorial stature" that Whitman and other US authors assumed. "As a U.S. author writes the South," Greeson explains, "he or she assumes a position of cultural command over passive peripheral territory, the position so prized in Western imperial culture. Her perceptions are authorized; his conclusions carry the weight of Truth" (9). For these writers, "our South is very good," argues Greeson, because as an indispensable concept, "the South" enables them to fashion America's national self-definition as well as its global ascendance (2).

The story I tell in this essay is different, but in some ways surprisingly similar to what Greeson observes. To be more specific, this essay tells a tale of cross-cultural writing and translation. It centers on how "the American South" was observed, translated, and rendered in the Chinese language by Yang Gang (1905-1957), a talented Chinese woman writer and journalist, who traveled to the American South in the 1940s. The first part of the essay elaborates on two trips to Austin, Texas. The first, made by Yang Gang in May 1945, is described in detail in her essay "The American South"; I made the second, following in Yang Gang's footsteps in August 2010. In carefully investigating what Yang Gang chose to include and exclude from her representation of the American South, I bring to attention the intriguing negotiation that Yang Gang engaged in at the borderline of two cultures. The second part of this essay situates Yang Gang's writing in a larger body of travel writings about America, especially the American South, penned by Chinese men of letters, starting in the 1840s, when China was forced into contact with an

unfamiliar and threatening outside world that included the United States.

### I. Two Trips to Austin, Texas

Born in 1905, Yang Gang was the daughter of a wealthy landlord. She was tutored at home in the classical curriculum until age seventeen and then went to a missionary middle school. From 1928 to 1933, Yang studied English literature at Yenching University, where she formed a very close bond with Grace Boynton, a faculty member and American missionary. Yang joined the underground Chinese Communist Party (CCP) while at Yenching, and was briefly arrested for participating in revolutionary activities.

Shortly after graduation, Yang became one of the founding members of the Beijing Branch of the League of Left-Wing Writers. She befriended the American journalist and activist Agnes Smedley, and assisted Edgar Snow on the translations for his collection of Chinese fiction, *Living China* (1936). After moving to Shanghai in 1937, Yang Gang quickly rose to prominence as a journalist for the prestigious newspaper *L'Impartial* and later became the editor of its famed literary supplement. In 1943, Yang Gang moved to Chongqing, and became an assistant to the CCP leader Zhou En-lai in the foreign ministry. That year, she also met John King Fairbank, who arranged for her to apply for a Radcliffe fellowship (Fairbank 276).

In 1944, Yang Gang was awarded the fellowship and came to America to study literature. Her real mission, however, was to “see” America, to write articles for *L'Impartial*, and to talk to American intellectuals. According to Fairbank, “Yang [G]ang was fluent in English, highly intelligent, and thoroughly devoted to her literary work. . . . She was a leftist but not openly Communist, in fact an ‘outside cadre’ urged by the CCP to pursue her career in the outer world, keeping clear of CCP connections” (275). It was during her stay in the United States from 1944 to 1948 that Yang Gang toured the South.

#### “The American South”

In her short but compelling essay “The American South,” Yang Gang makes a brief reference to the tropical heat of the Deep South before moving to the only topic that interested her about the American South:

racial injustice.<sup>1</sup> Yang Gang does not hesitate to admit that she “was already biased against the American South because the region is notorious for its discrimination against blacks” (49). She further identifies this as an American problem, declaring: “the ‘black problem’ seems to be synonymous with America. It also seems to be a large pustule growing on America’s nose” (50). In a way, she makes it very clear what she expects to see in the South: deplorable and vicious racism. But ultimately it is when she sees what she doesn’t expect to see that readers experience the most fascinating moment in Yang Gang’s journey.

At the beginning, Yang Gang’s narrator is extremely outspoken. On the train to the South the narrator claims, “as the train passed through Washington, D.C. I felt I had entered a barbaric world.” She comments on the dining cars, where blacks in white aprons serve whites: “The whole car was filled with outwardly clean, attractive people, meeting the highest standard of western civilization. Yet amid this civilized world I had a shameful feeling of savagery.” The narrator then observes how whites and blacks had to occupy two separate sections, and writes, “To be honest, even though I was born in multiethnic China, I had never seen one ethnic group command another to do all of its menial labor. It seemed to be behavior out of the caveman era, completely incommensurate with the dazzling bright, so-called western civilization before me” (50).

Several points deserve further discussion here. First, as I mentioned above, Yang Gang was a prominent journalist before coming to the US in 1944. In 1943, a collection of her writings from the war zone, *Travels in the Southwest*, was published to critical acclaim. Yang Gang’s writing about the American South showcases her brilliance as a wartime reporter. The narrator embarks on her journey with a clear mission in mind. She is precise and forceful when she sees opportunities to attack so-called Western civilization. Second, in *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies*, Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit define Occidentalism as the “dehumanizing picture of the West painted by its enemies” (5). Here Yang Gang’s use of phrases like *shengfan shijie* (barbaric world) and *yeman shidai* (caveman era) clearly echoes such

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<sup>1</sup>Yang Gang’s preoccupation with American racism is by no means surprising. One of the first works of American literature translated into Chinese was Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and since then Chinese writing about the United States has rarely failed to address the “Negro question.” For the ways in which the use of racial categories influenced many thinkers in modern China, see Dikötter; Tsu.

Occidental thinking. Her frequent uses of images from nature like *hongse shizi* (red persimmons) and *caomang senglin* (thicket forest) to describe the whites and blacks on the train also reveal this kind of Occidentalism.<sup>2</sup>

Third, in writing about the American South, Yang Gang consciously draws a line between “us” (China) and “them” (America). The racial injustice in the American South becomes one of the American evils that the Chinese condemn. Yang Gang’s “The American South,” along with a dozen other essays she wrote about the United States, were compiled and published as *Notes from America* by *Shijie zhishi she* (World Knowledge Publisher) in 1951, two years after the founding of the PRC, and a year after the outbreak of the Korean War (1950-53) on the tense Korean Peninsula. In many ways, Yang Gang is a typical Chinese intellectual appropriating the knowledge of the West (in this case, America) to achieve certain political and ideological goals. The American South and America generally were used here as a site to wage a linguistic and cultural war against so-called American civilization. As Yang Gang wrote in the preface to *Notes from America*, “the more we know the evil of our enemy, the more we recognize the beauty and goodness of ourselves.” To apply Greeson’s point, here the American South is also “very good” to Yang Gang, because it becomes an indispensable other (in this case, an external other) that enables Yang Gang to fashion the PRC’s national self-definition as well as its political ascendance.

Fourth, as Harilaos Stecopoulos points out in *Reconstructing the World: Southern Fictions and U.S. Imperialisms, 1898-1976*,

World War II helped make the Jim Crow South more internationally notorious than ever before, with German and Japanese propagandists emphasizing to the world that the home of the Four Freedoms was a place of vicious racism. The cold war would see a continuation of this trend, as the Soviet Union and its allies publicized various southern atrocities from the mid-1940s onward. (126)

In this sense, Yang Gang’s essay is the best example of this tendency to emphasize the deplorable state of US race relations.

Interestingly enough, later in the text, Yang Gang’s highly political narrator falls silent; at that moment, readers arrive at the most heartwarming episode in her essay. The scene begins when Yang Gang

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<sup>2</sup>See Phillips for a book that best exemplifies Occidentalism.

and her friend Erja arrive in Austin, Texas.<sup>3</sup> According to the narrator, the president of the university has just been fired. The students are very sad to see the president go, so they use the occasion to throw a farewell party for the president while also welcoming Yang Gang and Erja. Before the party, Yang Gang overhears Erja and the students discussing plans to invite representatives of black youth organizations to the party, but the plan does not materialize because the school administrators do not allow blacks to attend. After the event, Erja and Yang Gang jump into a friend's car and go to a house where many black men and women are in the living room. This is the kind of mixed meeting that was likely to draw the attention of the police. The narrator adds a sarcastic blow: "Here was concrete evidence of the American freedom to which the mayor of New Orleans had referred" (53). The mayor of New Orleans has told her that "Blacks truly do not want to mix with whites. . . . We in America are free; individuals are free to live as they choose. Blacks. . . . like to be with their own kind. It's not a matter of discrimination; they want to be separate from us" (52). Clearly, Yang Gang's narrator makes a salient point about the hypocrisy of America's so-called freedom.

At this mixed gathering, Yang Gang's narrator becomes less talkative and eventually goes silent: the emotionally intense dialogue between whites and blacks tells a story of its own. The meeting starts as a session for venting grievances. The blacks in the room talk about what they have seen and heard, as well as their own painful, humiliating experiences. Then the meeting takes a dramatic turn, when a young black female teacher gets really upset and angry, shouting loudly,

All white people are the same; they hate us. We are burdened and oppressed and lack self-respect; we trample on ourselves. . . . They [whites] may say nice things to us, but they hide their consciences, secretly following the reactionaries. I hate them! I hate all white devils, especially progressives! (54)

She then bursts into tears. The narrator makes one last comment about the deep-rooted mistrust and hatred that whites have for blacks, showing that blacks also have a deep prejudice against whites. After this somber

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<sup>3</sup>It is, of course, problematic for Yang Gang to use Texas as emblematic of the American South. The narrator opens the text by asserting that her goal is to pass through every state in the Deep South, but no other Southern state is mentioned in the essay except for Louisiana.

observation, the narrator simply records what the other people in the room are saying.

Erja, Yang Gang's friend, then warns that if blacks and whites who have been oppressed hate and despise each other, they will play into the hands of reactionaries, who intentionally turn class issues into race issues to turn oppressed groups against each other. "Friends, in a system that oppresses people, the oppressed—blacks and whites—have no way forward," she says. "At present every path has been obstructed by Wall Street. The rulers of Wall Street want our labor, and they want our lives. We need to stand hand in hand to oppose them!" (55). Erja manages to turn race issues into class issues. The essay ends when a black woman at Erja's side whispers in her ear, "If only we had united earlier the opposition would have toppled long ago. We need to do this now. We need to draw a clear line between our enemies and our allies, uniting regardless of skin color!"(55).

The silence of Yang Gang's narrator is not surprising. If the narrator had expected horror stories of racial injustice, she must have been surprised by episodes of heartwarming reconciliation, understanding, and love between two races. The race issue is the narrator's very assignment, and the site where her Chinese readers back at home can see the brutality and hypocrisy of so-called American freedom and civilization. However, if the race issue is ultimately a class issue, then the problem at hand is really not merely the problem of the American South, or even of America, but also the problem of China and the world. Not surprisingly, the narrator cannot comment without undermining her own argument, which she has made so compellingly. As a good writer, Yang Gang is honest enough to let her story go its own way. What takes place in that room, the fighting and reconciliation, misunderstanding and understanding, hatred and love, is the most eye-opening episode depicted in this essay.

### **My Findings in Austin**

My trip to Austin took place in August 2010. It had been a busy year for me. Earlier that year I had traveled to Charleston, South Carolina, visiting a plantation that V. S. Naipaul described in *A Turn in the South*. In July, I flew to England, presenting a paper on Marco Polo and world literature at the International Medieval Congress at the University of Leeds. While in England, I also visited London, the place from which

Naipaul departed to come to the US South. Then, after a brief stay in California, I came to Austin, Texas, for my research project on Yang Gang's trip to the American South.

On my flight to Austin I was reading Edouard Glissant's book about his trip to Oxford, Mississippi, when he was teaching at Louisiana State University; I had been teaching there since 2006. It was a bit overwhelming to think of all of the places I had encountered and all the travel accounts I had read. It occurred to me that what tied all these trips and readings together was my own obsession with the American South, and my desire to experience, to understand, to know, and to translate the region.

My affinity with the American South started in 1994, when I became an MA student in comparative literature at the University of Georgia. I lived in Athens, Georgia, from 1994 to 1997. A general concept of "the South" had existed in my mind before my encounter with the American South, but it was a very different one, shaped in a Chinese context. I am from Shanghai, China. Shanghai is considered a Southern city in China, and people from Shanghai, Southerners. As in the United States and in many other countries, North and South is a major divider in China. In the 1930s, when presenting the Chinese people to the world, Lin Yutang, one of the most important modern Chinese writers, talked about "The raw, rugged North and the soft, pliable South" (20). He described the Northern Chinese as

acclimatized to simple thinking and hard living, tall and stalwart, hale, hearty and humorous, onion-eating and fun-loving, children of nature, who are in every way more Mongolic and more conservative than the conglomeration of peoples near Shanghai.(18)

He described Southerners as

inured to ease and culture and sophistication, mentally developed but physically retrograde, loving their poetry and their comforts, sleek undergrown men and slim neurasthenic women, fed on birds'-nest soup and lotus seeds, shrewd in business, gifted in *belles-lettres*, and cowardly in war. (18)

Students of American Southern literature and history might be reminded of the regional typology that Thomas Jefferson documented in his 1785 letter to the Marquis de Chastellux:

<p>In the North they are          cool          sober          laborious          independent          jealous of their own liberties,              and just to those of              others          interested          chicaning          superstitious and hypocritical              in their religion</p>	<p>In the South they are          fiery          voluptuary          indolent          unsteady          zealous for their own liberties,              but trampling on those of              others          generous          candid          without attachment or              pretensions to any religion              but that of the heart</p>
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(Alden 17)

Without doubt both Lin Yutang and Thomas Jefferson were painting a stereotypical picture of the North-South divide in China and America, respectively. Stereotypes, however, can be helpful, especially in cross-cultural and cross-regional communications. While the use of stereotypes might risk blocking sophisticated understanding, it does highlight conventional knowledge and make the “Other” more approachable and accessible.

After arriving in Austin and settling into a small room at a bed and breakfast, I had the time to think about my trip. Unlike Yang Gang, I did not have a clearly defined mission. I envied Yang Gang’s focus, energy, youthful idealism, and fierce dedication to a cause she believed in, although this cause would later bring her to the darkest hours of her life. Yang Gang committed suicide in the late 1950s when her political ideals were crushed and many of her friends were publicly humiliated. The idea of the American South that Yang Gang brought on her journey was a political one, which was very different from mine. A few years into my residence in Louisiana, I started working on a book project titled *Translating Souths: A Search for Translators*, which took me to V. S. Naipaul, Yang Gang, Edouard Glissant, and many other writers, travelers in various Souths (especially the American South). Ultimately I intend to examine how the idea of the American South has been imagined, translated, and/or invented in China, in the US, and worldwide.

In recent years, scholars in American Southern studies have made a decisive turn away from their traditional navel-gazing and redirected their critical gaze outward, examining the region through internationally comparative frameworks. Michael O’Brien’s *Placing the South* (2007)

and anthologies such as *South to a New Place: Region, Literature, Culture* (2002), edited by Suzanne Jones and Sharon Monteith, and *Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies* (2004), edited by Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, among many other scholarly works, have opened up new spaces and places, connecting the American South with Italy, East Germany, Latin America, South Africa, and the UK. These scholarly endeavors also coincide with the emergence of the study of the global South, as demonstrated by the launch of the journal *The Global South* in 2007. In the preface to the inaugural issue, editor Alfred J. López defines the global South as a place that is “less a place . . . than a condition,” and perhaps an orientation. More specifically, he defines “global South” as a “signifier of oppositional subaltern cultures ranging from Africa, Central and Latin America, much of Asia, and even those ‘Souths’ within a larger perceived North, such as the U.S. South, the Caribbean, and Mediterranean Europe” (v). To him, the “global South” is a synonym for subalterity as well as a continuation of yesterday’s Third World and other similar terms.

In many ways, my project echoes what these scholars have ventured, addressing the global dimension of the idea of the South. But instead of focusing on the imbalance in the power relationship between the North and South, I’m more interested in how the idea of the South is negotiated, translated, and performed at significant moments of cross-cultural encounter. It is perhaps the personal dimension of my project that prompts me to pay more attention to those individual travelers, writers and translators, and to focus on their encounters and performances. If the global South is an orientation, about the return of the oppressed, my transnational South is about disorientation, about critical inquiries beyond the game of power.

The morning after I arrived in Austin, I visited the archives at the University of Texas, Austin. Yang Gang’s essay “The American South” caught my eye, as it depicts a fascinating moment of cross-cultural writing and translation. I understood that Yang Gang’s journey had a clearly defined mission, and her encounter with the region as recorded in her essay is very focused. Race was the only topic that interested Yang Gang, but I wondered what else our traveler saw and experienced on her travels and how she negotiated what she actually saw with what she wanted to see.

Despite its direct and forceful style, Yang Gang’s essay starts on a vague note: “One spring an American friend and I toured the American

South.” She reveals more information later: Erja, Yang Gang’s friend, belongs to an organization fighting racial discrimination. Erja plans to attend several lectures in the South, and the women decide to travel to them together. But what organization? What lectures? Was Yang Gang only accompanying her friend to travel and see the American South? With these questions in mind, I visited the archive.

What I found was fascinating: Yang Gang made headlines in *The Daily Texan* when she visited Austin in May 1945:

Mayor Tom Miller of Austin will welcome the Danish, Russian, Chinese and American youth leaders Thursday night at the all student convocation at 7:30 o’clock in the Main Lounge of Texas Union.

.....

The American Youth for a Free World, a clearing house of information and activity for national youth organizations in the United States, sends the four speakers to various cities to tell the activities of young people throughout the world

....

The speakers are Svend Beyer-Pederson, international relations officer of the World Youth Council and a member of the Danish National Council; Captain Orest Shevtsov, representative of the Soviet Youth Anti-Fascist Committee; Miss Frances Damon, executive secretary of American Youth for a Free World; and Miss Yang Kang [sic], former literary editor and war correspondent of one of China’s largest publications. (“Mayor to Welcome Speakers”)

Yang Gang was part of a delegation sent by the American Youth for a Free World. So this was the organization, and these were the lectures. Yang Gang was not just tagging along, but a participant in the lectures. But then why did Yang Gang conceal this information?

My guess is that she did so to simplify things so she could direct all of her energy to what mattered to her most: racial injustice. Perhaps that’s why in her essay Yang Gang claims that her friend belongs to an anti-discrimination organization, and states that these lectures are against racism. American Youth for a Free World was certainly not an anti-racist organization. As the newspaper piece makes clear, the organization promoted international understanding between the youth of America and those of other countries. Ironically, when Yang Gang came to the American South to verify horrifying stories of racial injustice, she herself provided an opportunity for the American South to know and to understand the outside world. The journalist of *The Daily Texan* hailed the visit of Yang Gang and her colleagues, lamenting, “Unfortunately, such visits are limited. . . . Even so, such an acquaintance

is not to be passed by when we are in the process of making peace with the peoples these speakers represent." I wonder what the journalist's reaction would have been to Yang Gang's piece, since she certainly did not come to Austin to make peace with the region. But at the same time, her essay does end on a strong note of conciliation, between blacks and whites at that meeting and between Yang Gang, the narrator/observer, and the American South she encountered.

As I continued my research, I discovered that there was even more to the story. When Yang Gang was in Austin, one event in that town actually made national headlines: the firing of the university president, Dr. Homer Rainey.<sup>4</sup> Rainey (1896-1985) had been appointed as the twelfth president of the University of Texas (UT) in 1938, and was fired in November 1944 after years of battles with the conservative UT System Board of Regents. (Half a century later, in the 1990s, the renovated UT music building was renamed Homer Price Rainey Hall in his honor.) According to *The Daily Texan*, "Fifty-two years ago, the president of the University of Texas stood firm for his faculty and for freedom, and it cost him his job." The story continues:

Rainey had been told by regents to fire economics professors who were "too liberal" and to drop support for a school of social work because it would promote socialism. The board had fired four instructors who spoke their minds to a newspaper, and banned books that were on classroom reading lists. . . the list grew so long that Rainey . . . at last went public in the fall of 1944, reading a list of 16 grievances to a faculty council meeting. (*The Daily Texan*, April 25, 1996)

Consequently, on November 1, 1944, the Board of Regents voted 6-2 to fire Rainey without comment. Following the announcement, thousands of people marched down Congress Avenue in Austin; marchers carried a casket labeled "Academic freedom" to protest the violation of that principle and to appeal to the governor. Rainey's firing was a national scandal, and the University of Texas was censured by both the regional Southern Association of Colleges and the national American Association of University Professors.

At the party that welcomed Yang Gang and Erja and bid farewell to Rainey, the narrator notes, "The president delivered a speech, and many other speakers followed" (52). We can surmise that the speech of the

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<sup>4</sup>For more detailed discussion about Homer Rainey and that incident, see Rainey; Orum.

president was about academic freedom, and so were many other speeches that followed, but of course the narrator does not provide any information. Had Yang Gang been a more open-minded observer, or less single-minded about what she wanted to see, would she have painted a more accurate picture? The wrangling over academic freedom did not make it into Yang Gang's writing. All she said was that "there was not a single black student representative present, not to mention performances by black organizations" (52). The narrator stayed firmly on track without allowing herself to be distracted by irrelevant noises.

After two days of hard work at the archive, I treated myself to a sightseeing trip in and around Austin. I wondered how many more places I would have to visit and how many more books I would have to read before finishing my South book, but I always knew every place I visited and every book I encountered in the process would make my understanding of the American South more layered and complicated. That day in Austin I walked down Congress Avenue, where thousands of people had protested in support of Homer Rainey and mourned the death of academic freedom. I also roamed Sixth Street, now a long strip of bars, music venues, and busy restaurants filled with people who never hesitate to show their unique style in dressing and walking. There were souvenir stores selling cowboy hats and cowboy boots. I tried to imagine how this street looked in 1945, what mission Yang Gang would be on if she visited Austin today, and what kind of negotiation she would engage in at this moment of encounter. I then thought about what I really wanted to write in this article on Yang Gang's journey to the American South.

Since arriving in the United States to pursue advanced study, I had always been told, and had passed on many times to my students, that an academic essay raises an argument in the introductory section, and then progresses in the form of a series of unfolding and supporting arguments until it reaches a powerful conclusion at the end. But if we agree that an academic essay is an exercise in knowledge and critical thinking, I often wondered if this format should be the one and only formula for all academic writing. As someone who grew up in a fairly different cultural environment, I always wanted to experiment with something different. Instead of an essay that privileges the linear progression of thoughts and arguments, I would like to write something like mosaics of scenes and citations, stressing an ongoing dialogical process.

On my walk back to my hotel, I thought about my own obsession with the idea of the South and about my trips and readings. I remembered this age-old metaphor that views the world as a book written by God for us to read: "The world as a book links to life as a voyage, and so the reader is seen as a traveler, advancing through the pages of that book" (Manguel 3). If my life is a book, the idea of the South has become an important recurrence through the pages that demands my reading and understanding. My encounters with all these other Souths invented and performed by writers and travelers such as Yang Gang, Naipaul, and Glissant have made this book more exciting, but also unsettling. I only hope my desire to "experience the foreign" not only enriches my own experiences of the South, but also in some ways contributes to that big book of the South written by many writers and travelers across time and space.

Although my trip to Austin was coming to an end, I still wanted to get closer to the exact moment when Yang Gang reached the climax of her encounter with the American South, namely the meeting of progressive whites and blacks at Mr. Carlton's house. By now we have already seen how Yang Gang tailored her materials for political and ideological reasons. I wondered if this meeting had even ever taken place; perhaps Yang Gang made it up. After all, these lectures down south had nothing to do with anti-racism, and Yang Gang's supposed friend, who might also belong to some organization fighting against racial discrimination, came to the South as a World Youth speaker, just like Yang Gang herself. So I tried to find out whether there was actually a black pastor whose name was Carlton. According to the essay, Mr. Carlton was the pastor of a black church and "was quite well known locally, especially among blacks, who regarded him as a man of great intellect" (53). If Carlton was so well known, there should be evidence of this in the Austin History Center.

I spent one afternoon at the Austin History Center. There were not many black churches in Austin in the 1940s; the most important ones were Sweet Home Baptist Church, First Baptist Church, Ebenezer Baptist Church, and St. John's Baptist Association. The names of the pastors of these churches were usually kept in the files, but no one named Carlton was listed. I became a bit anxious, and then the librarian suggested that I look up his name in the Austin City Directory. There he was: in the Austin City Directory, volume 1944-45, listed as "Carlton Geo (Rossa) evangelist h 2501 E 10th." Rossa was his wife, and according to Yang

Gang, was a brilliant graduate from a prestigious black college in Tennessee.

The librarian immediately found this strange because the directory would usually list the name of the church if the person was a pastor or an influential member of the organization. The name of his church was not given, and Carlton was listed only as “evangelist.” What made it even more interesting was that he was not listed in the 1941, 1942, or 1947 directories. Because of the war, the 1943 and 1946 volumes were not published; the 1944 and 1945 volumes were combined into a single directory. It seems that Carlton was only in Austin for four years at the most, and was not from the area, but a temporary resident. The librarian at the Austin History Center became annoyed with Yang Gang for giving the impression that Carlton was more noteworthy than he actually was, and for implying that he was a permanent resident of Austin. She suggested that Carlton listed himself as an evangelist so he could be more desirable by churches with different dominations. I was not surprised, however, because Yang Gang’s version certainly is more consistent with her mission. The meeting with Carlton is the climax of Yang Gang’s essay, so she would have wanted the characters to be larger than life. She described each of the blacks in the room as “the cream of Austin society” (53). Perhaps this was what she had been told. In any case, I was relieved to have been able to confirm the meeting, and the touching moment of understanding and reconciliation.

## II. A Map: Yang Gang in Context

Upon my return to Louisiana, I continued my research in order to situate Yang Gang’s essay on a map of America created by other Chinese travelers to the United States, especially to the American South. What follows are some of the most interesting sites from this map.

Before the 1840s, the Chinese people knew almost nothing about the United States.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the official who negotiated China’s first treaty with the US in 1844 after China’s defeat in the Opium War (1840-1842) reported to the emperor that “the location of the United States is in the Far West. Of all the countries it is the most uncivilized and remote. Now

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<sup>5</sup>When the first Jesuits came to China, a good deal of information about the West was made available, but “within the broad and tightly knit network of information channels, it seems to have been digested into virtual obliteration” (Eggert 70).

they hope for the Imperial Favor of granting a special Imperial Mandate which can be kept forever” (Swisher 48).

The first Chinese diplomats did not start visiting the United States until the late 1860s. Their official diaries were often published. In 1868, a young interpreter who accompanied China's first diplomatic mission to the United States recorded his impression of the “strange customs” of the American dinner party:

A while later we heard a plaintive *lili* sound like the chirping of an oriole; it was the barbarian women eating their meal. A cacophony of *dingdang* noises was the sound of all the people wielding their knives and forks. Men and women sat together with their shoes touching. In their enjoyment the seated guests would rise and make a big hubbub. (Zhang 32-34)

In *Travel Writing*, Carl Thompson defines travel as “the negotiation between self and other that is brought about by movement in space.” He explains: “All journeys are in this way a confrontation with, or more optimistically a negotiation of, what is sometimes termed alterity” (9). On the one hand, this young interpreter from China must have been consumed by the novelty of an unfamiliar people and unfamiliar customs. On the other, his record of that encounter reveals his own values and preoccupations. The sounds of knives and forks (so unlike chopsticks) struck him, and seeing men and women sitting close enough to touch (unheard of in Chinese culture where Confucian propriety would make this impossible) caught his attention.

Almost eighty years later, when Yang Gang visited America, she was spared that kind of cultural shock. Yang Gang belongs to a group of Chinese intellectuals who visited the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. Unlike previous generations of visitors or sojourners who came as students (especially the May Fourth intellectuals who arrived in the United States in the 1910s or early 1920s), this group came as professionals hoping to verify or correct their already formed opinions, and then take their newfound knowledge back to China to inform and educate their audience.<sup>6</sup> Most of these visitors were fluent in English and had personal or professional contacts who helped to arrange their visits.

Some of the other members of Yang Gang's group were Xiao Qian, Fei Xiaotong, and Zou Taofen. Xiao Qian (1910-1999), another Yenching

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<sup>6</sup>For more discussion of the early generation travelers and sojourners, especially Liang Qichao and Hu Shi, see Grieder.

University graduate and famed journalist, spent six weeks in the United States in 1945, covering the inauguration of the United Nations in San Francisco and then traveling to a few other cities as a correspondent for *L'Impartial*. The following is from one of his essays of miscellaneous impressions:

Of American cities I like New Orleans best, because it least resembles my mental image of the United States, just as I like New York least because it is most like that image. New Orleans is as leisurely, as unrestrained, as suave as eighteenth-century France. In the middle of the day its public squares with their tall straight palm trees are filled with people resting in the shade. On the “lake front” of the Gulf of Mexico people in broad-brimmed hats are fishing. All along the shore are crab restaurants. At dinner the most delightful thing is brandied coffee: after dessert the light is suddenly turned off, and all that can be seen in the dark is a blue flame. When the light comes on, coffee mixed with fragrant brandy has been served in front of the customer. (Xiao 183)

What strikes me most about Xiao Qian’s description of New Orleans is that he is completely at home with the Western cultural ambiance. His familiarity with New York and eighteenth-century France, his true understanding and appreciation of New Orleans and brandied coffee—these are all revelatory of the traveler who painted this wonderful utopian picture.

In the 1930s, another famed journalist visited the American South and wrote about race issues. His name was Zou Taofen (1895-1944), and he was one of China’s most renowned journalists. For many years Zou was editor-in-chief of the weekly magazine *Shenhuo* (Life), the largest magazine in the country. An earnest leftist writer, Zou was threatened by the Nationalist government. Fearing for his life, he spent two years in Europe before coming to the United States for two months in the summer of 1935.<sup>7</sup>

Zou’s essay also starts with the train he took to the South. His destination is Birmingham, Alabama, which he calls “an important place in the Black belt.” While Yang Gang’s narrator is extremely opinionated, Zou’s narrator plays dumb and conceals his thoughts on the racial problem, having been “earnestly warned by several progressive American friends in New York” (152). In so doing, the narrator elicits a range of opinions from different groups. On the train, two white workers insist that he “by no means stray onto the colored side, that it would be

<sup>7</sup>See Laughlin for more information on Zou Taofen.

terrible. In a natural and confident manner, they informed me that blacks were not considered human and could freely be killed without legal sanctions” (152). While Yang Gang’s narrator attends only two events, Zou’s narrator wanders to different places and talks to people from different backgrounds. He visits a nice barbershop, and goes several times to see the slums of the blacks, and even further south to Selma,<sup>8</sup> a small town 112 miles south of Birmingham. The narrator talks to his progressive friends, to a young black person in the little hotel where he stays, and to Mr. Zhou, the manager of a Chinese restaurant. He observes:

Let me say frankly that the ordinary Americans I met in the South were cordial and honest and gave me a good impression. Still, I know that the southern bourgeoisie’s fear of the reform movement was at an extreme and that if it had become known that I sympathized with this movement, things would have been different. (153)

Perhaps the most intriguing contrast between Yang Gang’s and Zou Taofen’s accounts occurs at the end of their essays. At the end of Yang Gang’s essay, her narrator goes silent and witnesses the most poignant scene in her journey to the South. Nonetheless, she remains an outsider, observing what is happening at an American meeting. By contrast, Zou Taofen identifies early in the text with his young American progressive friends, who after much suffering never slacken their work: “I will never forget their spirit; I would gladly be one of them!” At the end of the essay, Zou’s narrator is on a bus to Selma:

Probably very few Chinese travel in the American South, especially in small towns like that, so the passengers on the bus, both whites and blacks, showed some interest in me, or at least they all glanced at me several times. But all they could see was my exterior; they could not possibly imagine my thoughts and feelings at that time. While I sat silently, solitary and all alone, my brain swirled with thoughts of the wretchedness of an oppressed people and the cruelty of this irrational world! (158)

At first glance, the narrator seems to be totally alone; a Chinese among whites and blacks. On closer examination, however, especially the last sentence, in which the narrator sums up the race issue as “the wretchedness of an oppressed people and the cruelty of this irrational

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<sup>8</sup>Considering that three decades later Selma would be chosen by Martin Luther King, Jr., as the battlefield for the Civil Rights Movement, Zou Taofen made a very good choice to visit the place.

world,” Zou doesn’t see it as strictly an American problem, as Yang Gang does. Zou Taofen identifies with all Chinese (including those in America and in China) and all other oppressed people (both in China and in America). While Yang Gang uses the American South and the race issue to draw the line between them (Americans) and us (Chinese), Zou Taofen has a very different sense of identity. This makes sense given that Zou’s article was written in the 1930s, and Yang Gang’s in the late 1940s and published in 1951, by which time the United States was the enemy of the People’s Republic of China.

It is interesting that both Yang Gang and Zou Taofen chose trains and/or buses as bases for their observations of racial segregation in the Jim Crow South. Leslie Bow’s *Partly Colored: Asian Americans and Racial Anomaly in the Segregated South* also starts with a dramatic bus scene, described by Mary Tsukamoto, a Japanese American who boards a bus to Jackson, Mississippi, in 1943:

What an eye opening experience it was for us, victims of racial discrimination, to travel far into the deep South. We learned first hand about two centuries of degradation of blacks that was still taking place in wartime America of 1943. . . . We could not believe the bus driver’s tone of voice as he ordered black passengers to stand at the back of the bus, even though there were many unoccupied seats in the front. We wondered what he would do with us, but he smiled and told us to sit in the seat behind him. We were relieved but had strange feelings; apparently we were not “colored.” (2)

In discussing Tsukamoto’s front-or-back dilemma, Bow shrewdly points out the precarious position Asian-Americans and other “partly colored” subjects occupied in the Jim Crow South. Although Tsukamoto was able to sit with the whites, she was required to defer to the driver, the representative of white authority, who literally and figuratively put her in “her place.” Because Yang Gang’s essay is so focused on the black/white caste system, the problem of being “partly colored” did not make it into her piece. However, the narrator does acknowledge that “Because I was with a white person, I felt constantly under attack by blacks; I could not inhabit their space, nor could they inhabit mine” (51). She knew that her white friend helped to position her within this system of segregation.

Compared to Yang Gang’s essay, Zou Taofen’s is less dramatic but covers more aspects of Southern life. While in Birmingham, Zou went

to a Chinese restaurant and talked to the two managers there. He found out that

The city had only forty-five Chinese, all with good reliable jobs, and that there were two large and one small Chinese restaurants. Because the Chinese there were doing well financially, dressed neatly, and were honest, most people in the city had a good impression of Chinese. (155)

From a progressive friend, Zou later learned that these Chinese considered themselves part of the American bourgeoisie and did not sympathize with the labor movement. Here again the race issue is mixed with the class issue. These affluent, "partly colored" Chinese whom Zou met in Birmingham seemed to have secured themselves a safe place in the Jim Crow South.

Finally, Yang Gang's circle of intellectuals who visited the United States in the 1930s and 1940s is important, because in the late 1940s mainland China cut off all contact with America. The next generation of Chinese visitors to the United States would come from Taiwan and Hong Kong, and these visitors had quite different interests and concerns. When Yang Gang visited Austin, Texas, in the mid-1940s, Du Hengzhi, a visitor from Taiwan, was also in Texas, serving as a Chinese military officer attached to the American army. His memoirs of life on the bases in the South were published in Taiwan in the early 1950s, but his account, showing him driving a car, riding horseback, and having a romantic encounter with an American high school girl in rural Texas, paints a very different picture (Du 203). The next wave of Chinese visitors from Mainland China would not reach American shores until 1979, after the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

## **Epilogue**

In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt discusses how European travel books produced "the rest of the world" for European readerships at particular points in Europe's expansionist trajectory. She also demonstrates how travel writing gave Europeans a sense of difference from "the rest of the world," and how such signifying practices encoded and legitimated the aspirations of economic expansion and empire (4-5).

When discussing the strategies of representation, Pratt coins the term “seeing-man,” by which she means those bourgeois European male travelers whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess, seeking to secure their innocence as they assert European hegemony (9). “Innocence” was certainly not in Yang Gang’s dictionary. Yang Gang never concealed her commitment to revolution and leftist ideology. But while it is tempting to label Yang Gang’s travel writing as seeing through revolutionary eyes, one has to understand the complexity and ambivalence in this traveling new woman.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes I wonder if Yang Gang’s loathing of the South and her often authoritative and dismissive comments about it had anything to do with the fact that she was also a traveler from the American Northeast, a traveler who had sojourned in New England and would return there after her brief trip in the peripheral Deep South. In terms of an anti-Western and anti-American revolutionary, Yang Gang was also a very unique one. She had attended missionary schools, and earned her college degree in English literature. Her translation of Jane Austin’s *Pride and Prejudice* was published in 1935. Besides having great friendships with influential American intellectuals such as Agnes Smedley, Edgar Snow, and John King Fairbank, Yang Gang also formed a very deep bond with Grace Boynton, who later helped care for her only daughter while Yang Gang was working underground for the Communists. Boynton once recalled seeing Yang Gang at Radcliffe in Cambridge in 1947; Yang Gang looked “very stylish” in her Western clothes, an elaborately styled hairdo, and lipstick. Two years later, in 1949, when Boynton met with Yang Gang again in China, she was dressed in blue cotton clothes, looking thin, tired, and bothered with a constant sore throat. Boynton was impressed with the utter simplicity of Yang Gang’s life—sleeping in a dormitory, working twelve hours a day, eating only grain and vegetables, . . . carrying no money (West 227). Perhaps it is in light of such a complicated picture of this “revolutionary new woman” that we can better understand how Yang Gang traveled in the American South, *critiquing, projecting*, but also *seeing*.

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<sup>9</sup>See Larson for a discussion of “new women” in the 1930s and their revolutionary literary activities.

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